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It is to be regretted, that so little attention is paid to Italian literature in this country. Our Italian scholars are very rare, and men of letters in general seem to be satisfied with the productions of France and England. Undoubtedly these furnish a rich & ample repast; but the beauties of Italian literature contain charms upon which the man of taste and refinement delights to dwell.

In what may be peculiarly termed the belles-lettres, the Italian writers have scarcely been surpassed. Seldom rising to those lofty flights which dazzle the vision of the beholder, they seem to address themselves more closely to the finer feelings of the heart. They breathe the language of tenderness and love; while the harmonious modulations of the Italian tongue convey sensations unknown in other languages. Those who attempt to gain a knowledge of Italian literature through the medium of translations, must have but a very imperfect acquaintance with it. It is drinking indeed at a delicious, but at the same time, a muddy stream. The fountain must be quaffed at its mountain source, not in its meanderings through the distant valley.

It is owing to the softness of the

Italian language, that it has produced no very sublime poems. The works of Tasso and of Ariosto must be considered rather as splendid romances than as regular epics. Their language is that of passion; the understanding is forgotten, while the heart and the fancy are called into play.

In like manner the drama has not risen as it has in some other countries. We are tempted to assign to our own language the pre-eminence in this species of composition. It contains a vigor, and an energy of expression, calculated for the boldest exertions of the tragic muse; while comedy can find a variety of language, and an ease of diction, completely suited to her purpose. The French are said by some to excel in comedy; but undoubtedly, their language neither possesses the dig-

nity nor the vigor which tragedy requires. There is little nature in the proudest tragic productions of the French stage.

On the same principle, the Italian drama has always languished. The language of Italy is neither suited for tragedy nor for comedy; it is too exquisite for the one, and too undignified for the other. Their plays in general are altogether founded on the passion of love; and these are often found good as far as they go. But the mind becomes fatigued with the repetitions of tender sentiments & love sick expressions. It wants to be fired into enthusiasm, and warmed by the transports of heroic ardor. This will be found to be the great defect in the dramas of Metastasio, the prince of Italian dramatists.

Some of his fellow countrymen,

have however endeavored to raise the character of the drama. They made translations from the English writers; but it is remarkable, that none succeeded but the most impassioned plays, such as Romeo and Juliet. We consider the hope vain, of doing anything effective in this task, so long as the enervating language & manners of Italy continue.

But we would by no means be understood to disparage the literature of Italy in general. She has given birth to statesmen & philosophers, to cities and scholars, who have deservedly been the boast of letters. She has fostered the seeds of genius, and illuminated the world with the radiance of their matured glory. She has shown that the inadequacy of the language

for the expression of many things may be in a great degree surmounted; and she appears to be restrained alone by the influence of her civil & political institutions, which chain down her genius, & fetter her pinions.

It has been remarked however by some writer, to whom we cannot at present refer, that Italy possesses the singular glory of having her writers of the fourteenth century read and admired, while those of that age in other countries are becoming obsolete and forgotten. Just as the fact may be, we are nevertheless inclined to think, that so far from being any honor to Italian literature, it ought rather to be considered in a contrary light.

With the general improvement of a nation literature of course goes on. In the infancy of refinement letters must be neglected, while in the full blaze of information & civilised superiority they reach

a lofty height. A few extraordinary men will always it is true appear, like stars in the darkness; but the birth is premature, and they are to be regarded rather as deviations from the common course of things. The mind of man will sometimes take a spring and overleap the fetters that enthrall it; but the mass of literary men must continue to improve as society improves, and as the light of knowledge is diffused around. Such has in general been the case with France and England. The barrenness of their old authors corresponded with the darkness of the times and the poverty of the language they wrote in. Succeeding ages improved both, and the writers that appeared partook of the general change.

In Italy, circumstances were different. The language soon became settled, and a few brilliant sparks of genius were enkindled during the fourteenth century in that country. They dissipated the darkness

that had enshrouded the human mind. They claimed and received universal admiration; and canonised in the temple of learning, the writers of that period have been handed down to posterity, as proud monuments of human genius.

But faint indeed have been the rays of intellectual improvement since that period, as evinced by the writers of Italy, in comparison of what France, England, & Germany have effected. Instead of the crowds of volumes which annually appear in these countries, Italy now presents but a scanty proportion. Since the great era of her literary renown she has indeed produced several illustrious authors; but they are "few and far between." With regard to poetry, since the days of Ariosto & Tasso, where has Italy exhibited any bards of lasting renown?— Upon the whole therefore, she may be considered as rather having

slumbered on the past that in days of Roman grandeur it was her glory to guard with sacred ardor. Restrained by the galling influence of an unwarranted ecclesiastical tyranny, the mind has been restrained, the energies depressed. To warble to soft notes the melting and enervating lays of love; to gaze upon the rich hues of Italian skies & scenery; to feed the ~~heart~~ passions of the heart to the disparagement of the understanding, & the neglect of a due regulation of the fancy;— has been the employment of too many of those who have made pretensions to literature. All that can add either strength or dignity to the operations of the human intellect, has been forgotten; or has withered beneath a despotism, whose iron yoke once enthralled the whole of Christendom, by the darkest of earthly fetters — superstition and bigotry.

We are accustomed to look to Italy with mingled feelings of ~~regret~~

delight and of regret. To speak of Italy, is like the music of some lone and dying harp over the waterfall, sad yet sweet and soothing. The most cheerful notes come fraught with a melancholy which goes to the very soul. On the man of genius and of feeling, the same effect is produced by the mention of the history or attainments of this singularly illustrious and ill-fated land. The banners of imperial Rome have not lost their splendor, though shrouded in the night of ages, and removed by the long and rapid flight of revolving years. Her writers still shine over the wreck of empire, & the desolation of kingdoms. But when we trace Italy from that splendid period to the present; at one time overrun with barbarians, and at another rising with renewed though not the same energy from the dust; then rolling on in a wild & restless course, the prey of faction and the dupe of tyranny,

while she was at the same time the nurse of the fine arts, and the improver of the taste of the world; — how can we gaze upon her with indifference? How can we regard her but as a sad example in the history of nations, of genius weakened, and intellect warped, by causes, which, were they suffered to have an universal effect, would again bury the world in a second night of superstition, barbarism and crime? —